UNITED NATIONS

# World Chronicle

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**GUEST:** **Razali ISMAIL**
**President, 51st Session**
**United Nations General Assembly**

**JOURNALISTS:** Bhaskar Menon, International Documents Review
Barbara Crossette, The New York Times

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**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY**
**(51st Session)**

Razali ISMAIL, President of the 51st session of the United Nations General Assembly, addresses a wide range of issues related to the United Nations in general and to the work of the General Assembly in particular. Mr. Razali believes it is time for the UN to concentrate on delivery to people in need rather than on power politics, and that all countries would like to see an efficient organization with a delivery capacity. He calls on delegations to complete their work in a timely fashion, if they want to make a difference. Mr. Razali also believes that the United Nations should not be under the shadow of the United States of America, and he questions the wisdom of the Security Council monopoly over the work of the Organization and the selection of the Secretary-General. On that question, Mr. Razali believes that the African second term must be respected, and that qualifications should be the primary criterion for selecting a Secretary-General.

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**ANNOUNCER:** From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations General Assembly meets in a regular session in September of every year. World leaders converge on United Nations Headquarters in New York to state their countries' views on national, regional and international issues. This year the Assembly convenes with more than 150 items on its agenda. How important is the work of this world body, and what role does it play in international relations?

Our guest today, Razali Ismail, is President of the 51st session of the United Nations General Assembly. Mr. Razali is also the Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the United Nations. Joining me to talk with Mr. Razali are Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*.

Mr. Razali, welcome to World Chronicle.

Mr. President, the General Assembly session began with a bang, or actually a non-bang, the signing of the nuclear [Comprehensive] Test Ban Treaty, which an article in the New Yorker described as perhaps the most momentous event at UN Headquarters in the history of the Organization. What are you going to do for encores after that situation? Isn't there going to be a bit of an anti-climatic session?

**RAZALI:** I don't think the UN should be determined on the basis of one performance or one item. The Test Ban Treaty is important, but for some of us, like Malaysia and a few other countries, I mean, it's still a flawed treaty. What does it do? It establishes a monopoly of five countries to continue to have the trigger on nuclear weapons. So there's nothing else, there's no commitment to a time bomb framework, nothing. I think we went into this reluctantly, but we took into account that 150-odd countries co-sponsored the resolution and wanted it to happen, and we believe that this is a good step. But nevertheless, it is flawed. So I don't think the UN of the 51st GA is going to be predicated on that alone. That would be very regrettable.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So what do you think is going to be the highlight, Mr. President?

**RAZALI:** Well, I don't know. I think the UN should take that as an accomplishment of a sort, and then look in terms of revamping its negative image, begin to be more real, do things that have a bearing on the real world, that, as I said, aim back into reality, make a difference in real terms, not deal with words and rhetoric, but go on to begin to better perhaps the marginalized part of the world. This is very important. To me, this is very important. If the 51st GA is going to mean anything at all, it must relate to those

people that need help. For as long as we still mess around with power politics and the imperatives of major Powers in the context of the UN, we're not going to be able to impact, make any kind of consequential meaning to the rest of the people that are listening or watching us do things.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So you think the emphasis should be on development, the development of what people are pleased to call third world countries?

**RAZALI:** Well, yes. For the last 50 years the UN has completely ignored the third world countries, so to speak, or the developing world, ignored poverty, ignored social justice; they failed to apply universal values of the Charter in terms of making it mean something to those people. Because of the cold war, you know, you had to decide whether you were going to be the marionette of the Soviet Union or you were going to be the marionette of the free world, so-called free world. Within that, the UN was completely stifled in whatever it was supposed to do for the South. So it didn't do it. So it's about time that the UN begins to relate again to that. Because to a lot of people there is still hope that the UN can do something. And this is the way Governments must understand a sense of responsibility. Power politics alone is not going to save the world. Now, we accept that the Charter allows for people to be more equal than others and all that, but it is time to relate to those people who really need the help of the United Nations. These are the people in Africa, in Asia, in the islands of the Pacific. They must matter.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So the Western countries and Russia are playing too dominant a role in the UN, would you say?

**RAZALI:** You can make an argument that in the last 50 years the bane of the United Nations has to do with over-emphasis or inordinate application of power politics. Yes, you can make this argument. I'd stand by that.

**MENON:** You know, you've been an Ambassador at the UN now for about eight years, and these eight years have seen a major transition for the UN from the world of the cold war, which you described, to a world now where really it's not—it's a multipolar world, although people are still groping, trying to find a way through this world. How has it affected the work of the Assembly as you've seen it?

**RAZALI:** I think the Assembly has been affected in a very big fashion. The Assembly has been the casualty of very bad habits, habits that, if it was not done last year or the year before, therefore why should we do it this year? So let's continue with the whole process of inertia that we've been going through for the last so many decades. And this has resulted in a very negative image for the UN. We have no delivery capacity. You know, everybody looks at the Security Council, not that it has any delivery capacity—it delivered nothing for Bosnia, 250,000 people died—but at least there is this image of some kind of

action going on. But in the General Assembly, how do you package this in the context of TV and whatever people want to listen to?

**MENON:** Is the negative image outside or inside? Do the delegates themselves have a negative image of the Assembly?

**RAZALI:** Well, I think—I was talking about bad habits. This is what it is, if you have bad habits you begin to think that you are important, but you're not.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** What sort of bad habits are you referring to, Mr. President? Unpunctuality and so forth?

**RAZALI:** No, no, that's one aspect of it. There's a work method that—your punctuality, how you organize your work and all that is very important. And I'm trying to emphasize—

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Too much talk, not enough action?

**RAZALI:** Too much talk. But all that talk, where does it go to? All the decisions that we make at the General Assembly, do they mean anything? First Committee, Second Committee, Third Committee—the Third Committee is a very big example. What do we say in terms of social justice and the plight of poverty that really has a relationship and makes a difference to the people that really care and want some benefit from what we say? We don't.

**CROSSETTE:** In fact, there is some criticism that the General Assembly has become sound bites for 185, give or take, national television networks, that people come here to make speeches, to become world figures, and that even in those speeches there really aren't any clear new ideas laid out. You mentioned the other day about the committees being the centre, the focus on which you want to focus. Do you still feel that way now? I mean, is it less in the debate and more in the committees that the General Assembly can turn itself around and maybe overcome some of its bad habits?

**RAZALI:** The debates are very important. We want to get all the political leadership to come to the General Assembly to make a point at the debate. But you're right, Barbara, these people are sort of launching their political fortunes on the basis of what they say here, for very clearly domestic clientele. And it's a pity. We really—we want global, and mean what they say. But this is the problem with the UN; it has been used as a vehicle to say, to do things that are not for the UN, but for their own, for people's own special interests. So we have got to move from that. Surely, why not? If somebody wants to become president, and kings and prime ministers, why not? We'll allow for that. But there must be a subscription in terms of clear commitment to universal values. We don't see this. There's so much of power politics and how you see the world in your own terms, and this is not right.

**MENON:** Within the Assembly during the cold war, you had the East, you had the West, and then you had the South, which was essentially the Non-Aligned Movement, or the Group of 77 on economic matters. How has this particular combination of forces been affected by the end of the cold war? What's happened to all these different camps?

**RAZALI:** Well, I believe, and I hope my G-77 friends will forgive me for this, I believe that the bargaining influence of the G-77 has been reduced significantly.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** You're referring to the developing countries, the group of developing countries.

**RAZALI:** Yes. The developing countries have lost their ability to leverage politically. But the European Union and G-7 industrialized countries, the OECD, have correspondingly become more powerful. So you have a situation where again you have a small lot of countries being able to influence the passage of things in the UN, and, more importantly, they're able to influence the premises that we are looking at. And I am afraid to say where these countries are concerned it is done in a very selective fashion.

**MENON:** But what other groups have emerged? I've heard of the Group of 15; you have the small island developing countries [Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)]. What other groups are—

**LITTLEJOHNS:** You have the southeast Asian countries also [Association of South-East Asian Countries (ASEAN)].

**RAZALI:** Well, there are all these permutations. Yes. But basically the main bulk of it is the Group of 77, which started thirty-odd years ago—Michael, you must remember this.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Which is actually about a hundred and twenty something.

**RAZALI:** Now actually 127 and all that. But given the developments of a somewhat disparate nature in Africa, Asia, Latin America, you get the scenario now where whatever is happening in Asia doesn't really correspond to what is happening in Africa and Latin America, and people are going different ways. And some of the major countries of the G-77 are actually trying to be a member of the OECD. So then, you know, you have a conflict of interests.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The more developed countries.

**CROSSETTE:** But are there—is there—I think you may have touched on this in some of the things that you've said in recent years, but is there also a danger of some areas sort of drifting off from the UN system, not in real terms, but because they begin to get regional blocs that look after their own interests? That perhaps from the point of view of ASEAN the UN seems far away and not terribly relevant, particularly if, as you say, it's not meeting the needs of the people day to day, in some regions of the world?

**RAZALI:** ASEAN is not—is somewhat disappointed I think with the UN.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** That's the Association of South-East Asian Nations.

**RAZALI:** Right, sir. But that disillusionment is not to the core, as it were. We still would like to link up to the UN, the United Nations, and be seen to be doing something. But if you look at ASEAN, ASEAN is no longer dependent on official development assistance. ASEAN is now able to handle money from markets. So the public sector is coming into play in so many ways. There's a good and there's a bad about that. You know, if you allow the public sector to go on its own there may be serious excesses, there'd be problems—environment, social justice, and all that. But nevertheless, we could—I can imagine a situation where the countries of East Asia really do not need to deal with the United Nations. There could be a kind of regionalism. Of course, this is not to be encouraged. The UN must relate to those countries, even in terms of official development assistance. They must do this. But the question is, is the UN now relevant to the countries of East Asia? The UN has to make itself relevant, not just to the poor countries but to the countries that have done so well.

**MENON:** But are you being perhaps a bit unfair when you say the UN is so unrelated to what's happening in the world? For instance, the CTBT treaty which Michael began by referring to actually began in the General Assembly. For years the General Assembly passed resolution after resolution saying this has to be done, this has to be done, and finally when the time was right they went ahead and did it. Similarly, a few years ago, if you remember, the Assembly asked the World Court for an opinion on the legitimacy of the use of nuclear weapons. And this had a tremendous mobilizing effect around the world. So are you being entirely fair to the Assembly when you say it's that unrelated to what's happening?

**RAZALI:** I don't think I am unfair, but I'm impatient. If it has taken 50 years for us to come to a very flawed CTBT, we must be very slow in doing our business for the world. There must be something wrong with us. There must be something wrong with the whole intergovernmental process.

**MENON:** Yes, we know that. We've all seen—

**RAZALI:** Yes, this is it, I mean, these are bad habits. Why can't we concertina time and get things done quickly? I made this point earlier somewhere, that diplomats do not seem to understand the critical factor of time. You could negotiate for four years, and while you negotiate, trees are cut down, people die and people suffer with malnutrition or disease. Do we not know that we have a sense of—we have a very urgent sense of responsibility in this?

**MENON:** But what could be done to gear the UN more closely to reality?

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Before you answer, Mr. President, I have to reidentify you and the programme. This is **World Chronicle**, our guest is Razali Ismail, President of the 51st session of the United Nations General Assembly.

**MENON:** So to repeat the question, what could be done to gear the UN more closely to reality that exists out there?

**RAZALI:** I think basically one has to make the delegations that come here to the UN believe that what they do, if it's done the right way, can begin to make a difference. It is not an esoteric exercise, you are here meditating your navel or something; it's not that.

**CROSSETTE:** Yes. You know, it might be interesting at this point for you to tell people a little bit about what it is to be the President of the General Assembly, I mean, what your day is like, what powers you really have, what you've already learned, even in this short time, about how much influence you're going to have over this sort of uncontrollable body of people that represent a world parliament, in some senses.

**RAZALI:** I really do not know, Barbara, I really don't know. I know that there's a job to be done. I know that we have, you know, this negativism over the UN; I know that the intergovernmental process is up for very serious scrutiny; I know that the United States is not paying, and they say it is because—they aren't paying because the UN is not reformed enough, and all that, there are so many things wrong with it. But I'm sure if you examine the World Bank it's the same, there are so many excesses, many things are swept under the carpet and all that, and the big guys at the top were not really acting properly, you know, showing leadership. But here we are with this situation, 50 years since San Francisco. We really have to do something about this. And we have to command the attention of the major Powers to want to invest, to have confidence, to want to do something via the United Nations. And at the same time the needs of the countries of the South must be catered to. Forget about countries, talk about people.

**CROSSETTE:** But you yourself have already done some things—you know, cut the lunches, make the clock start when the clock starts, things like that. Do you also have some influence in, for example, speeding things up in committees, getting people to focus? You once mentioned that one of the problems is that if everyone tries to do a hundred things nothing gets done properly, let's see what each committee can do and do it. This kind of thing. What personal influence can you have over how this unwieldy body works?

**RAZALI:** I have no pretensions. My head is not that big—it's big, but it's not that big—to think that I can do anything that might.... I have to deal—I can only do it if I get cooperation from my peers. You know, the UN is like that. It's an ecosystem. I have to deal within that context of the ecosystem. But I believe that, given what I've seen from the debate so far, there's a tremendous interest in trying to change the image of the UN.

There's tremendous interest in wanting to begin to deliver, begin to mean something. We're not just messing around with words. I like that, I think I can get people to come together to try to put together a convergence of views that will have an impact in the real world. This is what I can do.

**MENON:** One of the things you have on your agenda this year is a proposal essentially coming from developing countries to broaden the input of non-governmental organizations, people's organizations, in the work of the UN. Now, when this matter was discussed in the Economic and Social Council, a number of developed countries said, we don't want people's organizations, or non-governmental organizations, dealing with matters like disarmament. How do you see the discussion of this matter going?

**RAZALI:** My approach to this subject is to talk about issues rather than access. It is important. But I think if the non-governmental actors can prove their competence and excellence on the issues, if they are relevant, more relevant than Government—and there are people like that, more relevant than Government—then they have a right to be there. They shouldn't talk about access. If they are relevant, there will be access. There is a way of doing this. And of course there are some Governments, both North and South, that are perturbed by the fact that there could be a non-governmental actor there listening and taking part, and taking into account what he says, or she says. So. That's not my bag. I don't have any problems with that, and I don't think my country has that kind of problem. But obviously when we talk about NGO participation we're not just talking about the right to access, it is the right of the NGOs to be there, to listen to what the Governments are saying. It's not just to contribute to the discussion. But the Government should have the courage to say these things in the presence of non-governmental actors. And this is the sore point about NGO participation.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ambassador Razali, you spoke earlier about reforms. And of course the United States is insisting on reform of the Secretariat in particular. What kind of reforms do you think would be acceptable to a majority of the members?

**RAZALI:** I think all the members, both North and South, would like the UN to be efficient and have a delivery capacity of some consequence. At the moment, we are being lambasted, the UN, being lambasted for not being able to do that. And on top of that, the UN has no resources, it is not able to identify resources, is not able to marshall resources. And that is a weakness. If only the UN had a treasury capacity, then it would be easier. But the US—it's really not clear what the US wants. I wish sometime later the US would really actually write down what they want to make them pay in full and on time. But nevertheless, it is the biggest player in the UN, and there is no way the UN can do without the United States. But having said that, we don't want to be always under the shadow of the

United States, and the UN is not going to be built in the image of the United States. Nevertheless, reform is something that everybody accepts. Reform, and that means looking at the financial situation, looking at the various bodies of the UN, whether they are able to deliver what they are supposed to do, and looking at the decision-making processes – that is the Security Council. Why should 15 countries, as it were, be the only people that determine things? Why should the five, the permanent members, as it were, be the only ones that determine, have a monopoly of decision-making? All these things have got to be looked at.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The United States has said that Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary-General, has not done enough in the way of reform, and they've lost confidence in him. Your Prime Minister has been critical of the Secretary-General's performance. Do you feel that there's going to be a deadlock toward the end of this year on the question of the appointment of a secretary-general?

**RAZALI:** I don't think so. I repose my trust and confidence in the ability and wisdom of all the delegations to know what is in the best interests of the Organization, and what the Organization is supposed to do. We cannot bow to the pressures of the United States; neither can we think in terms of personalities. I think the press has something to do with this. There is this total preoccupation about dealing with personalities other than dealing with issues, even on the question of the Secretary-General. You'd rather talk about, whether, if it's not Boutros, who else would it be? Would it be another – would it be a woman? and all that. Why don't you talk about the qualifications of people? Then we are somewhere with this situation.

**CROSSETTE:** But the General Assembly – could not this General Assembly in some way, maybe in a less than formal structure, provide a kind of forum for discussing these issues? They're not being discussed in the Security Council; the General Assembly will have to make a decision. And yet everything is bound by the sort of formality of the process. Isn't there any way to take advantage of all of these delegations here to open some sort of big discussion about what the world wants in a Secretary-General?

**RAZALI:** I'm not going to worry too much, Barbara, about the circumstances and the process and all that, I'm going to see what we can extricate. How do we build a role for the General Assembly? And given the circumstances surrounding the selection of a secretary-general this time, it is possible for the General Assembly, if it does its job well, to do pretty well and acquit itself. And I am quite confident we can do this. Now, after all, you must remember the Charter only allows the Security Council to recommend. The final decision comes from the General Assembly.

**MENON:** But it's been proposed that the General Assembly could be involved in establishing some kind of short list from which the Security Council could recommend. For

instance, if you said to your peers in the General Assembly, come, let's sit together and create a short list, what kind of reaction do you think you'd get?

**RAZALI:** I don't think the time has come for that kind of ideal situation. It is better to deal with what we are now. I know there have been some recommendations from Brian Urquhart and all that about that. We're not there yet. For this year, we will have to grapple with what the Security Council sends down. Now, is the candidate qualified? If we don't agree, we can send it back. There are ways of expressing our position.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Do you actually foresee a situation where the Security Council may come up with a name and the General Assembly would say, no way, Jose, and it would go back to the Security Council?

**RAZALI:** Your question presupposes that the General Assembly is a supine, weak-kneed kind of group. I don't think so.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** No, no, no! To the contrary. If you send it back to the Security Council, that's very far from being supine.

**RAZALI:** I mean, before it has happened—1951, the General Assembly pronounced, came to a determination of a candidate; in all the previous years it had just anointed whatever had been sent down by the Security Council. In this instance, if the qualifications are not right and we are truly representative of the good traditions of the UN, we should send it back.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The Africans are going to be very upset, if it's not Boutros-Ghali, if another African does not become the secretary-general. How do you think the General Assembly would deal with that situation?

**RAZALI:** I am on record to have said that in any event the African second term must always be guaranteed.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Must be guaranteed?

**RAZALI:** Must be guaranteed.

**MENON:** One of the things that you said in your opening statement to the Assembly and to the press was that the General Assembly should be more of an equal partner of the Security Council, should actually assume a higher profile. But how realistic is that? When you look at the power relationship between the Security Council and the General Assembly, how realistic is any chance you have of asserting yourself against the Security Council?

**RAZALI:** Obviously you are asking this question in the context of what happened in the past, where five countries can prevail on 180 countries. I don't think this has to be the feature of what is going to happen this time.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. President, we have less than a minute left. The way that things have been going in the General Assembly so far, are you satisfied with your attempts

to maintain punctuality for the meetings and to generally crack the whip around the delegates? Their response to your whip-cracking, has that been satisfactory?

**RAZALI:** I have not cracked the whip, Michael. I have just implored and then pleaded, gone on bended knees to this UN and said, look, what is the dignity of the General Assembly? It is to do its job well, to be able to punctual, to understand its responsibilities. And so far there's a resounding chorus of support for what I am trying to do. It is not Draconian. It is actually dealing with all my friends to help me out.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Have their speeches been a little shorter as a result of your efforts, do you think?

**RAZALI:** Well, I am sure they impose self-discipline in this, and it's beginning to work out.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** In the General Committee you kept the debate moving along very fast on the question of Taiwan, and you limited the long speeches to three paragraphs or something, I think.

**RAZALI:** But at the same time—this is true—but at the same time, over 50 countries spoke on Taiwan. So there was a clear examination of the issue.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Razali, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Razali Ismail, President of the 51st session of the United Nations General Assembly. He was interviewed by Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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